

Interviewer: On these tapes we're just looking for the history. I'm personally interested in the elections because I'm really concerned how it's going to come out.

Willie Epps: I couldn't tell you how it's going to come out.

Interviewer: Right, but what I want to know about, just like you were talking about, whether they're going to organize in Kentucky.

Willie Epps: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: That's the stuff I want [*crosstalk*].

Willie Epps: Well I couldn't tell you nothing about Kentucky because I ain't been there in Kentucky. But I know how the things and all back there down there years ago.

Interviewer: Tell me how it was.

Willie Epps: Yeah, you take Kentucky, just like it was up here. They come and worked for what they could get out and that's as cheap that you could.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Willie Epps: Yeah, just working for a small amount of money. You take in the mine, a company man, he may – well, now you take me, I made more for I'm a coal _____. I made [*inaudible*] I pulled \$5 a day. While the man working by the hour, he have _____ around about \$2-1/2, no higher than \$3 for a ten-hour shift. And then [*inaudible*]. We _____ years ago. But you can't afford \$20 _____. They never let labor live because why? As quick as they got in shape they organized. I mean then they organized, they got it good. Because I'm good all the way along from organize.

Interviewer: When did they organize in Raleigh?

Willie Epps: Raleigh never organized this place. _____ what. In either '31 or '32, it was organized here in Raleigh County. This here was some of the first places _____ organized in, in Raleigh County. And they organized I think _____ and they come here the next day or two and organized here. And then they went back over to Lillybrook and organized. They picked up places then they get Finity and all them placed. I did have a history of all them dates.

Interviewer: Did they have any trouble organizing then?

- Willie Epps: Well yes, you had trouble with they operators because they didn't want it done. And for a long time if you spoke or organized labor then you didn't have no job. You lucky to [inaudible]. That was before they organized. And if you run over to attend the meeting and come back in and [inaudible] telling a meeting, [inaudible] string of bank cars, motor pulling them through the mines, while they had them there, well you didn't have no job. You a [inaudible].
- Interviewer: They just fire you [crosstalk]?
- Willie Epps: They fire you [inaudible] you ain't got no protection. You had to take it because you didn't have no potato, you didn't have none of this. But as we got organized labor they were particular about that. You didn't run into many firings and one step or another because they had some protection. You had to be to work [inaudible]. John L. Lewis [inaudible], you see John L. Lewis got that contract. That contract was signed by the government, like all the rest of the company. And you couldn't do anything [inaudible]. And you had a chance because you had the fieldworkers to back you up. John L. Lewis backed you up. But that be the turned, you see, all like that because you couldn't fool around. They might fire you and two or three days they make them put you back.
- You go and get fieldwork and even tell a reporter, you were fired unjustified. Now they fired some. Some of them needed firing because some of them was justified in. But you see, you take a man _____ justified in his work and come to find out, kick him out, why _____ for him.
- Interviewer: Did you get to work during most of the '30s or was the depression too --?
- Willie Epps: The '30s was awful bad. Got to work one and two days a week. And then again [inaudible] you could make \$2 and \$3 a day and, you know, two and three days a week taking care of _____ it wasn't but a very little money, pay _____ rent, light bill and everything else.
- Interviewer: Was it on mostly scrip or did you have cash? Did they give you cash?
- Willie Epps: No.
- Interviewer: Scrip?

Willie Epps: You got a scrip. Now if you didn't _____ all your scrip _____ when pay day come you could draw the rest of it in cash. Now like if you keep – you see, you _____, you got a scrip on Thursday, before pay day, you know, the bookkeeper would figure your time up. Well if you had \$10 or \$15 or \$20 added up that you didn't cover on the scrip when they had closed the night, why you'd draw that in money on pay day. But if you didn't leave nothing you didn't draw nothing.

Oh, I remember the time – I remember folks here, oh, if I didn't have that big a _____ -- I had a small _____ never did _____ raising five kids. But I know folks here who had seven, eight and nine kids, didn't know what a dollar looked like. For years. I mean one, two and three years he didn't [crosstalk].

Interviewer: [Crosstalk] just kept the family fed.

Willie Epps: Just kept the family fed and script, stuff like that. And you had _____ that's all they could do. Didn't have no other way. And had John L. Lewis _____ and _____ things, whole lot of old men, [inaudible] made a little extra money and _____ saved a little bit. He'd draw a little bit and pay _____. But before then you couldn't draw _____.

Interviewer: [Crosstalk]?

Willie Epps: Huh?

Interviewer: When did they first put the pension and stuff in?

Willie Epps: Let me see. Now we had a _____, we started paying Social Security in '30, like you said, when organized. The next year was Social Security. Well, now I didn't know nobody draw no pension – when was the first pension do you remember, Rose?

Rose: Huh?

Willie Epps: When's the first pension you remember got paid from Social – from John L. Lewis you talking about?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: That's – when's the pension you know from John L. Lewis?

Rose: [Inaudible]?

Willie Epps: No, John L. Lewis.

Rose: [Inaudible].

Willie Epps: Yeah.

Rose: [Inaudible].

Willie Epps: I can't either, but [crosstalk] – George Burke's the first person I know drew a miner's pension here.

Interviewer: Is that after World War Two, or --?

Willie Epps: Yeah, that was after – no, World War Two? George Burke started drawing a pension on that Mussolini war, didn't he, Rose?

Rose: Huh?

Willie Epps: George Burke draw a pension on that Mussolini war, didn't he?

Rose: No.

Willie Epps: I forget now [crosstalk] the first check John L. – old man George. Now him and old man Roy and them coming and getting checks long about the same time, United Mineworker checks. But yeah, definitely she – well that was the first United Mineworkers checks that I knowed anything about.

Interviewer: Did they have compensation if you were injured [crosstalk]?

Willie Epps: Yeah, they had compensation if you got hurt in the mine or something like that you – you'd get so much a week for compensation, so much a month for compensation. And figured it was about – no, I don't know. I drew compensation some one or two times in the lines of 10 or 15 years. But you'd – maybe \$15 or \$20 a week compensation if you had a family.

But you see John L. Lewis [inaudible]. Now _____ if you was overworked – the first work I know was what they call the unemployment; that was come through on the John L. Lewis pension. You'd be – the company cut you off maybe for a week or two or something like that you could draw what you call unemployment. That's the first _____ of that was \$16 a week. Well it went from that to about \$20. I remember drawing \$40 several time, uh, cutoff, you know, that's through the employment.

[Inaudible] United Mineworkers _____. It hard _____ though. United Mineworkers had a hard _____, slopping in water and everything that's in the mines, you know? And then again, just like a ship: if you went to the company and told, say, "Now listen, that place is bad. You got too much water," or something, he'll tell you, right now, say, "I ain't got nothing in the world but this say you have to work."

Now you see that's where the hard part comes in. That's where it come off – maybe you go to the scrip window, you ain't had the opportunity to load no coal much. You got seven or eight children, you go down and tell the bookkeeper you want \$2 or \$3. He tell you, say, "You can't get but one." And if you get two, a lot of time you had to buy your own pile to chute your coal. They give you \$2 but you got to save one of them dollars and all to chute coal tomorrow with. And you'd take that one dollar and buy for your family. So that – that's the way it come along.

Interviewer: You had to buy all your own *[crosstalk]*?

Willie Epps: You had to buy all your – all your tools and shoes and stuff at that time to mine your coal. They didn't furnish it. But long later on up the road, about 20 years ago *[inaudible]* the mine _____ furnishing – they didn't furnish your powder, for instance, tools, shoe _____ and stuff like that. But he always bought the _____ because I ain't *[inaudible]*, you had what you called the hang load man, a man mines his own coal _____ the mining; machine man cuts it; you go down and chute it down; you got _____ powder to chute it down, and your tools to load it. Well now after a while, certainly lifetime – see, you can't keep that in mine date for way back 40 years back on up to the present day *[inaudible]* – I forget when it was, but they furnish you tools, pick and shovel and things like that then. They'd furnish them to you, maybe one shovel a year. If you broke it you replace it yourself. You buying a shovel and _____ that yourself. They done furnish you that shovel for that year. And you *[inaudible]* have one shovel last you, man, you digging all that coal _____ coal. You can get six months with that shovel you doing good.

Interviewer: How – when did you first go into the mines?

Willie Epps: Rose, when did you all come into the mines?

Rose: Huh?

Willie Epps: What – what year we come here?

Rose: In '30s.

Willie Epps: In '30s? '30s? '30 what?

Rose: In '30.

Willie Epps: In '30 she said, in '30.

Interviewer: You came here from Virginia?

Willie Epps: From Virginia, yeah. Yeah, I come in from Virginia, right here. I worked railroad for the company, Virginia Rail.

Interviewer: Huh.

Willie Epps: I worked all my life, up until here, the last eight, nine year when I come on pension. I worked in these mine; I worked all these hills over around here you see. All around here. Some of them _____. I worked 19 years for this one company. And then – and then like that, right _____ here, you know where Lillybrook is over there?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: I worked 13 years over there. I didn't have to go nowhere to get my pension and things; I already worked [*inaudible*]. I _____ the man _____ running around. I worked _____.

Interviewer: Were you glad that you worked in the mines?

Willie Epps: Yeah. I'm glad now. And then again, to tell you the truth, I just loved the mines. I stood on that porch – everybody got cut off. See, I was able to work. For five years they had probably got cut off at Lily. I was able to work. And I stood on that porch at night, and you'd hear a little cry and they say them shifters run over the mining thing. Well I wanted to get up out so bad to go to work. So I was making – I called myself making terrible money, but I come out the mine I was making better than \$20 a day and working every day and had a good boss and a good mine. Lillybrook Mine was a good mine for a coal mine.

Interviewer: Good, clean mine?

Willie Epps: Yes sir, a good, clean mine. Good mine. I liked it.

Interviewer: Huh.

Willie Epps: And I stood on that porch and give a little cry for many night, wanting to go back in the mines. Well now I tell you right now, if the mine hadn't been like it used to I don't guess I'd be out the mine now, if I hadn't gotten killed or died. Because I just – I enjoyed it, being in the mine when I did.

Interviewer: What, did they put more machinery in?

Willie Epps: They put machinery in Lillybrook but they had put machinery in it, but then running to long by hand loads, it was what you call chute – top chute. And that machinery, by getting caught up so fast it'd fall in. You couldn't mine with that machine. So it was a chute top. And see they mining for years and years by hand loading and everything, and blasting and *[crosstalk]*, that cracked the top and tore it off _____. And then that machinery – take the machine, move it 50, 75 and 80 and 100 foot of coal a shift, don't get top time seven. It just fall. Whenever you get to work it just fall in. I've seen it fall over 100 foot, just like a *[inaudible]*. And see, you can't *[crosstalk]* --

Interviewer: When you started in did they still have donkeys and everything, did they?

Willie Epps: Well when I first come to this country we had mules. They had mule mine right up there when I first come to this country. That mine right there, across that railroad there. You mine that coal with some teams. But the mines I always worked in was motor mine, pulled it by motor either by rope. It had electric _____ take a rope and likely pull it out by electric. I worked in them too.

You take coal mine – coal mine work _____ right. You can't find nothing on that. But you get to one of these old type companies, probably go and _____. He'd get a bucket, little skid _____ and you got to jump around and take half what you make, and all the whole job and so it's a tough way to do it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: It's a tough way to do it.

Now a lot of time the company hire a boss, he's a good boss. He don't care because he able to – he know what he doing. Well now you take a good boss in the mine, *[inaudible]* a miner look at him a whole lot better than they will a little scared miner. You treat him like a dog, and tell him if you don't like it, no, I can get somebody

_____ you to do something. Well now that feller, he have a hard – he might have the desire to treat his labor right, but you see, he can't treat them right.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: Can't treat him right because why? His man ain't treating him right, and he's scared, he's scared he's going to lose his job any time and he's scared.

Interviewer: Would the union stand up for you when you got a bad boss?

Willie Epps: Would the union stand for the working man?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: Yeah, yeah, union stand up for you, long as you were right in the way you went. But you had to be right. Union wouldn't stand for you if you were wrong. But if you were right they stood up for you. If you had the right kind of United Mineworkers, see every job had a union crew on it, had charter things, you know. You had committees, all that on the job, you see? Well now if you want to take up an aggrievement, like I stayed on the committee 13 years.

Interviewer: You were on the committee in _____?

Willie Epps: Yeah, I stayed on the committee. When there was something on – went wrong here, it was three of us was committee chair. Now like I did _____ a man here today, when we'd come out at night we'd call a special meeting, just the United Mineworkers through here. But we'd take that aggrievement up and in the morning we'd be over back with it. Fieldworkers be in the morning, tell that superintendent back on what they got to do. They wouldn't – they wouldn't ask him would he do it, they'll say, "Now you got to cooperate with that man _____. [Inaudible] but you got to pay him." And [inaudible] right.

But you see, later on up the road now, show you want _____ trouble now. Take these little young miners, what come in, 18, 20 years old, they didn't know what union meant. Well you take these old operators, these guys _____ all us old fellows. Anytime you see guys _____ playing, if you got to 50 years old you couldn't get a job in this mine to save your life. Well, you know, a man ain't no account in the coal mine, you know why? _____ as much as 35, 40, 50 years old. Well he tell you something, "Well, see, I can't use you since your age is _____ and we got to hire young men to do so

and so." Well these young folk, they would have been a greatly help to us if they had had the right knowledge. These would be up to telling them about if he offer him a job, say, "Well you can't give that old man a job, so I don't want now." Well he would have mentored him up. And the old miner would have showed him how to go and what to do. And you got him a good wage. Now that's the reason why coal mining now is messed up like it is right today.

Interviewer: Because there's a gap between the coal miner --

Willie Epps: There's a gap between the old man and young man. They kick the old man out and get a young man _____ because the young man didn't know [inaudible] give me \$20, \$25 a shift, give that young miner \$10 he say he making big money because he don't know. He don't know no better. See? That's the way that work. That was tore up the mining company in this country. Whenever you see a lot of these old miners _____ now, _____ you see right there right now, got coal enough to raise a family. I mean a whole _____ of folks. But no, put them young fellows in and they can't get it. You take a type of experience to get coal. I mean these young folk they didn't know nothing.

Interviewer: Do you think the safety's less now in the mines than it used to be?

Willie Epps: Well a whole lot of them say it is. I tell you one thing: what make it look like there's more safety here because they ain't working nothing like the men that used to work.

Interviewer: They're not working --

Willie Epps: No, they will take ten men now and will -- with these laws and things and put on more coal than 40 men used to put out. Well you see that's [inaudible] hurting and killing men most of them now because you see they ain't got as many in now.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: See, there used to be a top man and now I just remember the times there used to be right around 500 men worked during the day and 400 at night, [inaudible]. Well now you'd take it right now if he come that _____ run as much coal as all as used to run, be 25 men, with that machine. See that all's hurting more wage. That's cutting labor out and everything else.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Willie Epps: Yeah, I remember times _____ -- it used to be a time you didn't catch no machinery in the mine, nothing more but a coal-cutting machine and a motor. The rest of it done by labor, hand labor.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Willie Epps: See, I remember the time when they didn't have a machine, and now you used to take and dig the coal, take it by pick. Pick and bucket and then chute and load it up. But you see, these _____ way back you all and you see when they was mining coal they weren't paying nothing for it but you did make a living at it. And all the mine _____ -- you could get a job any way -- you'd get three jobs a day then if you wanted to. Any why you walk into a man mining and told him you want a job doing coal well he's hire you.

But after they run it on down, got the place you couldn't buy a job. Superintendent look up at you, "You come here run an office now?" *[Inaudible]*.

Interviewer: When did they first start cutting down a little bit?

Willie Epps: What, the men?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: That was Eisenhower's last term be coming to messing up. All of Eisenhower's first term in the White House they done good for the first four years. His last four years he coming, cutting off and messing up _____. And companies _____ messing up, you see.

Interviewer: Was the old mines dusty and --?

Willie Epps: Yeah, some of them real dusty. Some so dusty you couldn't see another man, like I hear the _____ car, sending him to me and I couldn't see or you couldn't see me, so much dust.

Interviewer: From the explosion or from the --?

Willie Epps: No, it wouldn't be from the explosion, it be from dusty.

Interviewer: From the coal --

Willie Epps: Uh, gas, gas, gas cutting. You take gas and get to working in the top -- now all coal got gas but some mines got more gas than other. When that gas get to working in that top and that top _____ every

now and then that dust 'cumulate. Them motors get to running and stirred it up, all them down there, drilling. Yes, all sorts of dust.

Interviewer: There's a lot of dust in the mines now, isn't there?

Willie Epps: Yeah, there plenty dust in them now but they ain't bad as used to be because they control it better. You take all these machines now, watered down – they're supposed to be. Of course I guess some of them just _____ don't water them down but they supposed to be watered down and they – you was working on this before I come to the mine, every machine that's operating in the mine supposed to have a water pump on. And what I mean by that, just as soon as that machine turn that coal, haul that coal, joist, loader and everything supposed to have a pump on it. The water in that coal mine keep that dust from raising. So any time you ever do get that – like, uh, black lungs or any lungs, it don't never come out. That stays with you until you die.

Interviewer: Yeah, it doesn't come out.

Willie Epps: Yeah, don't never come out. And you take a person, get black lung – see, the youth didn't call it the black lung, you call it something – everything else. And you used to be you couldn't get a name _____. Now you take plenty mines right there right now, I know have had silicone for 40 years. But these doctors wouldn't name it for nothing until right until lately. Now them call it silicosis, call it black lungs.

Interviewer: Did you go up to – have you been up to Dr. Rasmussen's --?

Willie Epps: Dr. who?

Interviewer: Rasmussen, the black lung testing place in *[crosstalk]*?

Willie Epps: Yeah, yeah, I'm getting now.

Interviewer: You got your --

Willie Epps: Yeah, I got that now through. Yeah, they _____.

Interviewer: Oh that's good, yeah. Some folks have a lot of trouble *[crosstalk]* –

Willie Epps: Oh, some of them ain't got it yet.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's *[crosstalk]* --

Willie Epps: I know something that – now I know a preacher I used to work with, old preacher Sutton over here in back. That man was proud a man as ever lived, and I _____ that man the world ever has had black lungs. He can sit back and talk to you all day long, but unless you put your ear side of his face; you can't understand nothing he say. And he used to have a strong voice any man you ever see.

Interviewer: And it's because it's eaten out his lungs?

Willie Epps: The black lung, the coal eaten his lungs out. And that silicosis – now you take – I don't believe the black lung nothing but that old time silicosis. Now after I got paid for my black lung I been dealing with this doctor, some parts of 20 years. He told me after I got my black lung he say, "Yep, you know one thing?" I say, "What's that?" He say, "You can't [inaudible] silicosis." I say [inaudible]. He say, "Well you can get silicosis." I said, "No, I'm getting black lung." He said, "Don't make no difference. The state supposed to pay you black lung." He did tell me, say – I can find a picture in here, but you supposed to get black and you supposed to got silicosis, way back yonder so many years ago. Well I _____, I seen him but two, three times before I come out the mines about silicosis. I didn't know anything about black lung, I know that's just said a few years ago, since that come out. And but I know about silicosis. And every doctor I mention told me, "No, you ain't got no silicosis, you got a little something though, or something like it _____. It ain't nothing to never bother you none." Just as soon as I got out the mine, see after you go to the mine so many years, you couldn't pick it up. Couldn't pick it up and get it in years. But whiles you was in the mine if you – you had supposed to go by and _____ \$30 because you paid to support through the company for your doctor's care. They couldn't keep you from going to the doctor. But after you run down in money and everything doctor tell you – you go to the doctor, paying \$25, \$30 a trip to get to do something to you, you wouldn't be able to pay it. So he just knocked me up with silicosis.

Now I needed silicosis long time before I got black lung because the _____. But I couldn't get it because he said I didn't have it. And then you ain't got no way to prove yourself [inaudible] by a doctor. And the doctor tell you, "No, you ain't got nothing like that." Well, you know _____ to snipping now between him and the company to do that. Company had him bought out.

Interviewer: Yeah, sure.

Willie Epps: Now since what you doing now it's going to be a thing to pass, they catch a doctor doing a thing like that if he ain't ready to _____ he going to get a whole lot of fining. But it used to be nobody push it because the poor working man wasn't able to push a doctor.

Interviewer: Yeah, the company just had a *[crosstalk]* --

Willie Epps: Company had it wrapped up with the doctor. Nothing you could do. The doctor wasn't going to -- the company paying him more money than you could pay. So you ain't going to get a doctor put no 400-500 men on silicosis or nothing like that. So tell the man say, "Yeah, you got silicosis," because that going to _____ ever since you been at it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: They supposed to pay you for it.

Interviewer: Did you think the union should have tried harder to get the black lung before it came --?

Willie Epps: The union? No, I don't think the union worked really. I ain't never know the union to get right at black lung stuff until right now. The unions they can get at it now. I can't hardly tell -- it was -- what that man name used to walk around, tote that little old lung around in his hands? I forget his name. Rose, what that man name, that doc?

Rose: What?

Willie Epps: Walk around, tote that lung in his hand.

Rose: Dr. Buck.

Willie Epps: Dr. Buck. Dr. Buck the person I know started hauling this hear black lung business.

Interviewer: That was before the union got -- got -- that was probably a bit before the union, wasn't it?

Willie Epps: No. They never paid for nothing like that until about -- for no black lung until this doctor worked it out. This doctor *[inaudible]* work hard. That's been how many years ago, Rose, about six? Four?

Interviewer: Did you think the union should do something with it?

Willie Epps: Yeah, the union should help these folks. I think the union should help these folks that ain't got it that the doctor don't give it to them or something. Now some folks happen to be walking around right now have got it. And I believe they entitled to it, tell you the truth. I believe they entitled to it. But you see, but my believe don't make them get it.

Interviewer: Don't make them get it, yeah.

Willie Epps: No. But they be entitled to it. That's what the old preacher told me. I believe he's entitled to it. There's some folk right around here, I believe they entitled to get the black lung. But I can't prove it because I ain't no doctor.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Willie Epps: You see, it takes a doctor to prove it. Now it be something else working on lung – wouldn't be black lung. But he act just like he found it.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Willie Epps: Mm-hmm. Whatever did it should ought to be looked into. And it's going to have to get up a club by the union to get _____. And now _____ going on working now, work with this man. If he can get in, and get him a crew, why he can get on to a strand like that, would help him more than anything in the world. You understand what I'm talking, don't you?

Interviewer: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Willie Epps: That would help him. Now he could walk around and get around and check on a whole lot of these old miners, laying around in these wheelchair and things, and get them on his case and things like that. That would help him. But he ain't got time now. He started too late.

Interviewer: Yeah, he's probably --

Willie Epps: Yeah. Now I don't say he started too late, but you see, you like to pick up things like that, back down the road to work them out. That the way this here doctor, he was telling me a little while ago: got _____ because he started four or five years ago and he worked it out. He made it through: he made the state prove it that they did have it. He was a doctor himself, and he was a heart surgeon too. He worked it out. I don't know if you ever read about him.

Interviewer: Yeah, I've heard of him.

Willie Epps: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, I heard one of his rallies.

Willie Epps: Yeah, he was a smart man.

Interviewer: Yeah, he's a smart man. [*Crosstalk*] it was really good what the doctors did on that.

Willie Epps: Yeah, now you take that – if you can get a two or three years wait and see you got the first pick-up on something. Now you take John L. Lewis, when he ran for United Mineworkers, he had put folks up here working a long time before he got into politics to get him organized. He had to show them something. See, you take a poor class people, hardest folk in the world until you show them something. But if you can show them how you want to do them good, now he ____.

Interviewer: Did you ever hear anything about the union troubles in Mingo and Logan [*crosstalk*]?

Willie Epps: Yeah, I hear different ones talk about it but I wasn't there. See, I --

[End of Audio]